

## Conversation with the Bedouin

Our Conversation with the Bedouin.

Date: 4 June, 2004

Time and length: We started about 11 a.m. and the conversation lasted about 2.5 hours.

Background: The Bedouin are a nomadic people living in the deserts of the Middle East. They live in wool and camel hair tents and travel with their livestock with the seasons and the rain.

Location: In the Eastern desert of Syria, near Palmyra. We were seated on carpets and cushions in the public area of the tent of the eldest brother of the family. The public area was covered in carpets, except for a rectangle of dirt in the center where the food was presented on a special cloth, which we sat around in a circle.

Participants: Douglas & Stephanie Hackney and 24 members of an extended Bedouin family. Only the male members of the family directly participated in the interview. The women are generally segregated in Bedouin society and sat in a separate circle in the tent's public area. Stephanie participated because, as a foreign woman, she is considered a male for the purposes of conversation and interaction, but is still allowed to be alone with, and interact with, the Bedouin women, a unique capability unavailable to any man outside the family.

Customs: It is impolite to show the bottom of your feet. You should only use your right hand in any interaction or eating. Bedouin coffee was served, followed by tea. Traditional Bedouin food was offered and served. It is customary to give hard candy as gifts, especially to the children. We provided hard candy and also took photos and gave them photographic prints of each child, each family group and the Patriarch's entire family that was in camp that day.

Language: The interview was conducted in the local Arabic dialect. All Bedouin also speak a separate dialect that is not generally understood by Arabic speakers. Interpretation was provided by our local English and Arabic speaking guide.

Douglas: Thank you for welcoming us to your home.

Bedouin Patriarch: You are most welcome here. Please, sit, be comfortable.

Douglas and Stephanie: Thank you.

Douglas: How many children do you have?

Bedouin Patriarch: I have four sons, these four sons here.

Douglas: How old are you?

Bedouin Patriarch: I am about 70 years old.

Douglas: And your sons?

Bedouin Patriarch: My sons are 55, 40, 32 and 24 years old.

Douglas: How many grandchildren do you have?

Bedouin Patriarch: I am not sure, I can't keep track of that number. I think there are somewhere between 15 and 20. Maybe more. My sons are working hard every night. (laughter)

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Stephanie: How long have you been in this location?

Bedouin Patriarch: I have lived in this area my entire life, moving from place to place to follow the rains and grazing land for our sheep. We have been in this camp for about a month.

Stephanie: How long will you stay here?

Bedouin Patriarch: This is a good place. We will stay here at least three months. We may stay up to a year if the grazing remains good.

Stephanie: When will you move if you do so?

Bedouin (various) We will move before the beginning of Winter.

Stephanie: How long does it take you to set up camp?

Bedouin Father: We can set up this tent in about an hour. It takes us less than an afternoon to set up the camp of our four main tents and sheep shelters.

Stephanie: When do you eat meals and what do you eat?

Bedouin (various): We have breakfast around 6:30 to 7:30 a.m., depending on the season, lunch around 1 p.m. and dinner around 8 p.m. For breakfast we have tea, olives, olive oil, sheep's milk yogurt, sheep's milk butter, Bedouin bread, cucumbers and tomatoes. For lunch we largely have the same as breakfast. For dinner we add some meat such as chicken or lamb.

Douglas: Do you slaughter your own sheep for food?

Bedouin (various): Yes, of course.

Douglas: How are the children educated? Do you teach them?

Bedouin (various): If we are close to a school during the warm months, the children attend. During the winter when we are usually close to a town, the children attend school there. The boys receive more schooling than the girls.

Douglas: How many sheep do you have?

Bedouin Patriarch: We have about 300 sheep. Bedouin families have between several thousand sheep for the very wealthy to about 200 for the poor. As you can see, we are not wealthy, but we are happy. We are rich with children.

Douglas: How many sheep do you lose to predators?

Bedouin (various): We have between 100 to 300 live births twice a year. We also buy about 100 sheep a year to provide new blood to the breeding stock. We lose about 10% of the total flock annually to predators, mostly wolves, and about 5% a year during the dry months of winter due to lack of water.

Douglas: Are the sales of your sheep your only source of cash money?

Bedouin (various): Yes, we sell about 100 sheep a year at market for our cash money. Because we only have cash money twice a year, the store owners give us credit until we have cash money.

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Douglas: This is the same as it is in America for farmers.

Stephanie: Are your marriages arranged or are they love marriages?

Bedouin Patriarch: People start to marry in their twenties. If there is love between a man and a woman, then they marry. If there is no marriage by 30, then the families will help to find a spouse within the Bedouin community.

Bedouin Patriarch: Is your marriage to your husband a love marriage?

Stephanie: Yes! My marriage is a love marriage. I am very happy to be married to my husband. (Laughter and happiness, especially from the Bedouin women)

Douglas: Do some Bedouin have multiple wives?

Bedouin (various): Yes. Our cousin has four wives. It is very expensive to have multiple wives.

Stephanie: Do you celebrate marriage anniversaries or birthdays?

Bedouin (various): No, we have no calendars. We live by the seasons.

Douglas: With no mailing addresses, how do you keep in touch with family and friends?

Bedouin (various): We use mobile (cell) phones. (laughter from Douglas & Stephanie) We also visit the souk (market) three times a week and there we can learn who is camped where and pass along news among our community.

Douglas: What do you do for health care?

Bedouin (various): If someone is sick, we take them to the hospital in the local town in one of our three trucks. Health care is free to all citizens of Syria.

Douglas: When do chores and responsibilities start for the children?

Bedouin (various): At about 12 years of age, the children are required to start watching the flocks and do other chores.

Douglas: Where do you get your water?

Bedouin (various): We drive about 25 kilometers (~16 miles) to a well. The government has a special well for the Bedouin with free water. If we use the regular public well it costs 50 Syrian Pounds (about \$1 U.S. Dollar) to fill our tank (the tank was 3/4 the size of a full size pickup bed).

Douglas: Do you truck all the water for the sheep?

Bedouin (various): Yes, in this area there is no oasis with standing water near our grazing grounds, so we must truck in the water for our sheep.

Stephanie: How many dogs do you have to watch the sheep?

Bedouin (various): We have three dogs. We get them as puppies from other Bedouin families when they have a litter and we are in need of a new dog.

Douglas: How much rain do you get here?

Bedouin (various): We average about 135mm of rain a year. This year we only had about 85mm.

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Douglas: What do you do in case of a drought?

Bedouin (various): The government provides feed for the sheep of the Bedouin in a drought year.

Stephanie: What are your tents made of?

Bedouin (various): We use two types of tents. In the warm seasons we use white wool tents, because they are cooler. In the cold seasons, we use camel hair tents, because they are black and are warmer.

Stephanie (to Patriarch): How many wives do you currently have?

Bedouin Patriarch: I used to have a wife, but do not have one now. I am looking for a new wife. When you go home to America, tell the women there I am looking for a wife. I have a good tent, 300 sheep and many grandchildren they can play with and care for. (laughter)

Bedouin (various): Thank you for the photos of our children and families, they are the only photos we have ever possessed.

Douglas and Stephanie: You are very welcome. Thank you for your hospitality and sharing your time and home with us.

Bedouin (various): Please stay with us longer. Can you sleep with us here tonight? We have plenty of space for you. You are always welcome in our home. Tell the people in America that we are their friends and they are always welcome in our home. Peace be with you, with your family and with your people.

Some photos of our time with the Bedouin follow.

All photos by Douglas Hackney unless otherwise noted.

The resolution of all photos has been significantly degraded to reduce the size of this document.

Photo equipment utilized:

Doug:

Canon EOS D1 MkII

Canon 16-35mm F2.8 L

Canon 24-70mm F2.8 L

Canon EX550 strobe

Canon Powershot S500

Canon CP330 printer

Lexar 4GB memory card

Lexar 2GB memory card

LowePro MiniTrekker AW

Steph:

Canon EOS 10D

Canon 28-135 F3.5-5.6 IS

Nikon Coolpix 5700

Lexar 2GB memory card

Lexar 1GB memory card

LowePro DryZone 100

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Bedouin tent and sheep.



Bedouin child watching sheep's milk being separated for butter and yogurt.

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Bedouin woman pouring separated milk into container to make yogurt. The milk will cure in the desert sun in this container for several days.



Bedouin Patriarch. Giving Pictures™ image ([www.givingpictures.org](http://www.givingpictures.org)).

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Bedouin Patriarch with extended family. Giving Pictures™ image ([www.givingpictures.org](http://www.givingpictures.org)).



Bedouin breakfast. Bedouin bread is around the outside. From 12 o'clock, clockwise: Tomatoes, native Bedouin vegetable dish, sheep's milk yogurt, sheep's milk butter, cucumbers; in the center: salt.

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Bedouin elder woman. Giving Pictures™ image ([www.givingpictures.org](http://www.givingpictures.org)). Photo by Stephanie Hackney.



Bedouin child. Giving Pictures™ image ([www.givingpictures.org](http://www.givingpictures.org)).



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Shooting Giving Pictures™ images ([www.givingpictures.org](http://www.givingpictures.org)) of the family groups. Photo by Stephanie Hackney.



Bedouin children watching prints appear from the Canon CP330 printer. These were the first photos these children had ever seen of themselves.

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Steph displaying pictures on her Canon 10D to the Bedouins.



Bedouin tent pole detail.

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Bedouin woman.



Bedouin child.

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The old and the new. The timeless ways of tents in the desert, now equipped with battery powered televisions.